

# The Banana Boat Story

*By Sasha Rumbaut*

**I**n the spring of 1928, at the age of five, my Granpapi, Rubén Darío Rumbaut, arrived in New York City from Cuba by ship with his mother, Zoila Rosa. After the United States intervened in Cuba and the Philippines at the turn of the century, the United States government instituted special programs to train teachers from those countries in the United States. And so it was that Zoila Rosa, a kindergarten teacher, was chosen. What she lacked in English fluency, she made up for in resourcefulness, and was determined to learn about the American school system. That first day in the United States, after riding around in taxicabs, overwhelmed by the skyscrapers and the heat, Granpapi vomited all over the cab. His first encounter with the English language was the stream of bad words that the cab driver sent his way.

The English bombardment continued during his summer days in a private kindergarten class. He could not understand the teacher's words, and it puzzled him that she seemed to keep repeating "picuala," the name of a Cuban flower. It wasn't until later that he realized she was really saying, "Be quiet." As he recalls, the class visited museums, went to concerts, and played on the monkey bars in Central Park. The main disappointment of his visit to New York was that he would not be able to make good on his promise to his friends in Cuba; he'd told them he would bring a box of snow home for them to see. He was inundated with images by the time he finally left the country several months later, shortly after his sixth birthday.

Little did he know he would return to the U.S. with his own children three decades later. After the fall of Batista's dictatorship on January 1, 1959, many Cubans supported the revolution and its leader, Fidel Castro. However, hopes of a democracy soon turned to fears of communism, and people began fleeing the island. By then, Granpapi had more than his own future to take into consideration; he was married to my Granmami, and they had five young children. A friend of Granpapi's who worked at Pan-Am Airlines had informed him that Castro intended to pass a law by July 20, 1960, prohibiting departure from the island. (This rumor was later proven false; the law was passed much later on.)

He also told them to be as inconspicuous as possible. However, many Cubans had by then already raided the stores in search of luggage. Consequently, the only luggage the Rumbauts could find were a handful of orange cardboard suitcases and two aluminum suitcases, which Granmami feared would bring extra scrutiny. "Ya todas las maletas se las habían comprado," she would say. Nonetheless, they were more fortunate than some. When the suitcases were all taken, many Cubans resorted to duffel bags.

Granpapi had to go through many channels in order to obtain passports and visas for himself and his family. As a doctor, he also had to secure permissions from the hospital in which he worked, the medical association, and the neighborhood police. A final trip around the island was made in order to see many of the sights: Cienfuegos (Granpapi's birthplace), the Yumurí and Viñales Valleys, the beaches. Granpapi and Granmami could not reveal their intentions to

anyone for fear of discovery, leaving under pretense of attending a medical conference. Granpapi did not even tell his own side of the family of his plans until after July 10, his thirty-eighth birthday. His mother, Zoila Rosa, who would stay behind, said the realization that he was leaving was like lightning hitting her. Later that day, a storm emitted a bolt of lightning that entered through the window of what had been Granpapi's bedroom at his mother's house and cracked the mirror on the wall.

Six days later, the family prepared to leave. As July 16 was Our Lady of Carmen's Day, and one's name's day was almost as important as one's birthday in Cuba, friends and family routinely called Granmami, whose name was Carmen, throughout the morning. At the time, it was not unusual for phones to be tapped, so the plan could not be revealed even this late in the game. A friend, Rosita, was told she could not stop by until later that afternoon, to prevent her from discovering the truth. By the time she arrived, the family had gone, and only Zoila Rosa remained to tell her the shocking news.

On July 16, 1960, the Rumbaut family of seven fled the Castro government of Cuba and landed in Miami, Florida. They could only take their wedding bands and one other piece of jewelry per person. They were allowed to take \$150 for each adult, including Rubén Gustavo, the oldest, and nothing for the other four children. Five children, all under the age of twelve, and two parents in their late thirties arrived with \$450 and few possessions. The intent was a brief exile, with hopes of soon returning to a Cuban democracy. But their lives would forever be changed, as the life that awaited them in the U.S. was nothing to which they had been accustomed.

The Rumbaut children had been raised in a rented two-story house. There was a narrow cement patio and in the back, a living quarters for the maid. The bedrooms were situated on the second floor, with the boys in one long room with three beds and the girls in another. Furniture that Granmami had inherited was painted white with lacquer. There was also a grandfather clock and a wooden dining room table with legs in an angled design. (Thirty-six years later, that table and clock were still there!) For a brief time, the family also owned a small, black dog called Laika, named after the dog the Russians sent into space, whose ears and tail were tortured by constant play from five active children.

The house was surrounded by lush growth of brightly colored tropical plants. By the front door, the address number "4306" was displayed by flat metal numbers screwed to the tan stucco and bordered by a three-inch silhouette of a palm tree. The windows and stairs were protected by decorative black ironwork in sharp geometric patterns. The floors were made of terrazzo, cool squares of black and white marble.

But all that had to be left behind. The family's used car had been sold to buy clothes for the trip and luggage, and \$100 had been sent to the brother of María Concha, a family friend, in New York, for retrieval upon their arrival in the States. After boarding the plane, the passengers sat for almost two hours, pending government permission to leave. Once in the air, the passengers were subdued, looking out the windows for last glimpses of the homeland, but their relief was palpable, for they had succeeded in leaving, and they knew the trip would last less than an hour. Granpapi looked back through the window at the grey tower of El Morro Castle, sitting on the bay of the city of Havana, his last vision of Cuba. They arrived between 7:00 and 8:00

p.m. Because the Rumbaut family was the most numerous, they were the last to unboard the plane and go through customs.

The eldest son, Rubén Gustavo, recalls being told the actual reason for their leaving (as divulged by Granmami), although Granpapi denies revealing their plans to any of the children. He says he told Rubén they would be leaving for a month, and that Rubén may have suspected the truth, as people were constantly disappearing from the island. He maintains that he did not want to unnecessarily worry the kids, as well as the fact that confidentiality was of the utmost importance.

Granpapi knew that the mischievous children sometimes could place the family in grave danger. Once during the Batista regime, he parked the car full of children in front of a hospital where he needed to make a short visit, and he returned to the car to discover a soldier chatting with the boys. His concern increased tremendously, however, upon hearing Luis say to the soldier, "Wow! What a neat machine gun you have! We have some bigger ones at home!" It took some fast talking for Granpapi to convince the soldier that the child was kidding.

Whether or not Rubén Gustavo was taken into his parents' confidence or not, his memories are clear in his mind:

*"I remember the day of the trip vividly. The hours in Rancho Boyeros at the Havana airport; the long waiting, both before and after we were ushered into the glass-partitioned area pre-departure (referred to as 'la pecera,' the fishbowl, because of the glass-encased feel of it).<sup>1</sup>*

*"I remember that the plane's departure was delayed by 2 hours, that Papi was getting more nervous, all the more after at last we went inside the plane (my first time ever aboard a plane, so exciting for many reasons); Papi was on the seat in front of mine; I remember (or so I think) his tensing up as they announced that a Mr. so-and-so was being asked to step off the plane, and a miliciano entered the plane with a machine gun and escorted the person out... I remember another long wait inside the plane, until at last it took off; and I remember vividly glancing out the window as the plane went up into the clouds, consciously telling myself that whatever I would then see would be my last images of Cuba--and those images were of what seemed like a zillion royal palm trees, until they were covered up by the white clouds--much too quickly, I recall, and I still remember my disappointment that those images could not linger longer..."*

Luis, one year younger, remembers the means of transportation—"a Pan Am propeller plane." He recalls, *"On the way over I thought of the letter I was going to write Nana, including a description of the clouds that looked like cotton fields. I decided the simile was pedestrian and*

---

<sup>1</sup> This "fishbowl" impression was not uncommon to Cubans and has been documented in similar studies of Cuban exile. In Hoobler's *The Cuban American Family Album* (CAFA), a young Cuban girl describes her memory of the airport and "a huge room with glass walls, my sister and I in an aquarium with a lot of strangers and our parents on the other side of the glass" (31). This woman shared the feeling of alienation that Rubén G. felt. She left her parents behind in Cuba, as part of the Pedro Pan Program, wherein children were sent to the U.S. and helped by Catholic social agencies.

*abandoned it, although I could not come up with anything better."* His thoughts were still with Cuba, with the way he would describe the trip to those left behind.

Carlos, the youngest son, asserts that his strong memories do not begin until after the family moved to a house in a Miami neighborhood. Most of his memories of childhood in Cuba are gone. This may be due in part to his younger age or as a result of a natural defense mechanism, one which spared him the pain of resentment or loss.

Miryam, the eldest daughter, remembers the trip as "very adventurous and exciting." She had a good attitude toward the U.S. and welcomed what had been explained as a "vacation." She says, *"I did not know anything about politics back then as I was only seven, but I did resent Castro and I prayed every night that we could return to Cuba."*

Perhaps because of his age and the apparent awareness of the purpose of leaving, Rubén possesses the clearest memories of the siblings. A cousin, Beatriz, noted that, *"I think Miryam [the eldest daughter] is right about how one's age at the time of moving to the U.S. has a lot to do with one's feelings and memories. For Rubén G., it seems to be one of the key defining events of his life."* Almost twelve years old, he was developing from a boy into a man, capable of comprehending the significance of such a move.

Mari Carmen, at the time the youngest at five years old, not only resented Castro, but also her circumstances. She asserts:

*"I was told that we came to the States because this was my Saints' Day present. No one talked to me directly about what was going on (probably because they thought I was too young to understand, or that it was better to pretend and protect the children). I knew that terrible things were happening and was getting no clear explanation. Everyone around me acted in a hostile fashion (probably because everyone was frightened, sad and confused . . . and maybe my perceptions were skewed because of these other factors). I was at the age where I believed my thoughts were powerful enough to cause actions outside myself. Therefore I thought it was my fault that we were all going through such an impossible time. Let me be clear that I am not blaming anybody. I think we all did the best we could."*

Miami was the destination of choice for most exiled Cubans. Many upper- and middle-class Cubans had visited Miami in the past. It was only natural that they chose a familiar place with a familiar climate. Seeing themselves as exiles rather than immigrants, they knew Miami's proximity to their homeland would allow them a quick return once Castro was overthrown. Carlos explains, *"The socioeconomic strata to which they belonged left en masse, or close to it. The values shared by this group on individual freedom, independence, career and religion, not to mention anti-communism, all led to their leaving."*

Upon arrival in Miami, the family gathered their bright orange luggage and secured it in the airport lockers to be retrieved two days later. They brought one suitcase filled with necessities and piled into a rental car, then headed toward a recommended hotel called the Berkeley Shores in Miami Beach. They had quite a time of it, going in the wrong direction, and ending up in Hialeah in the rain. Rubén Gustavo recalls:

*“Mami started crying (she was in the passenger seat up front, navigating while Papi drove); we saw a familiar sight: a woman dressed in white coming out of what could only be a hospital; Mami (the family's designated English-speaker) attempted to ask her where Miami Beach was; the nurse (what else?) pointed us toward the right direction. And at last we made it to the Berkeley Shores, around 11 p.m. I remember the old retirees sitting on rocking chairs on the front porch of the place, the hot humid air.*

*“The ‘lobby’ of the place, full of old people watching a black-and-white TV set up high on a wall in a corner. I was mesmerized by the images on the TV; in particular the beginning scenes of a program that was about to begin: a 1920's-style car accelerating amid gunfire until a small title grew and covered the small screen: ‘The Untouchables,’ with Elliott Ness! All the while, as I was trying to see that and all my five senses were on a sort of existential red alert, an older woman who had seen us come in was right next to my face, talking to me in undecipherable English, going on and on....”*

They arrived at the hotel at 11 p.m., but by the time they got into the rooms, it was almost midnight. On the porch was a Cuban couple who offered to help the disoriented exiles. Granmami went to the rented rooms to prepare them for the kids while the couple invited the rest of the family to have some fried eggs. Everyone was starving and grateful for the food. Granmami was busy preparing the rooms and never had a bite. This behavior was typical of her “*los otros antes que yo*” mentality. It wasn't just manners and convention that governed her behavior, but concern for her family.

The family stayed at the motel for a week, then moved to the Dolores Apartments, where Luis recalls drinking “*industrial quantities of orange-like juice that, magically, came frozen out of cans to be mixed with water!*” A new world was opening up before him. He continues:

*“I was fascinated by the screens on the windows. They made more sense than mosquito nets. On special days we ate out at the Golden Arches. Our regular item was the grilled cheese, for 45 cents each. Ordering for the family of seven was like holding a rodeo around the Tower of Babel, and, amazingly, it did not seem to get easier with practice.”*

In Granpapi's paper, “The Cubans: Historical and Psychological Background,” presented to the American Psychiatric Association in 1969, he describes five aspects of the exile's psychosocial crisis: (1) transposition to a brand-new, radically different environment; (2) sudden role change; (3) separation from significant others; (4) anxiety-provoking events and environmental stresses; and (5) anticipation of uncertainty, risk, struggle, perhaps decline and failure.

At this juncture, the family was just beginning to adapt to a new environment. The children were young enough in that they were still in the process of forming identities. But the sudden role changes of the two parents must have been difficult and drastic. Just trying to keep track of five little bodies, each of them full of questions and needs that must be met, must have been overwhelming. How did they ever make ends meet with so many mouths to feed, so many limbs to clothe, and so little income? First, we need to know how fate brought these two souls together.

Rubén Darío Rumbaut was born on July 10, 1922 in Cienfuegos, Cuba. His mother, Zoila Rosa López Fundora, had been born in 1895, the last of fourteen children. A musically-gifted and talented songwriter, she not only taught kindergarten, but wrote the music and lyrics for some 400 songs. Many of these songs were published in her “Cancionero,” or songbook, the first edition of which was published in the 1940’s. It became adopted in classroom instruction all over the island of Cuba.

Granpapi’s father, Bienvenido, was born in San Juan de los Yeras, Cuba in 1891. Prior to his marriage to Zoila Rosa, he attended Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio, to study pharmacy and learn English. Zoila Rosa stayed behind in Cuba and maintained a lively correspondence with him. He returned to Cuba a pharmacist, a title that essentially allowed a pharmacy to conduct business, so he had few duties and much free time. He and Zoila Rosa wed shortly after.

Attracted to intellectual pursuits, he joined a cultural group, Ateneo, and became Secretary and later President. The group met to discuss movies and literature, history, and current events. He was involved in civic activities; he was named director of a city newspaper, *El Comercio*, and was in charge of the city library. As the de facto mayor of the city, he delivered eulogies for many people and became very well known. In fact, when Granpapi and Granmami were honeymooning in Cienfuegos, they could not walk down the street in the company of Bienvenido without people stopping to talk to him.

Though many Cubans practiced Catholicism, Bienvenido had not raised Granpapi in a devoutly religious environment. The issue came into question when Granpapi finished the seventh grade. Up until then, he had attended only public schools. But in Cienfuegos, there was no public high school built yet. So Granpapi was forced to attend a private Catholic school, the Marist Brothers, even though his parents were not Catholic. Bienvenido was much distraught that he had to pay to send his son to a religious school, but in the absence of an alternative, he reluctantly gave in.

In his religion class, Granpapi began to raise Cain. He questioned the existence of evil in the world, asking his teacher why God would permit such a thing. He was disconcerted by the image of San Luis Gonzaga as a role model. As a boy, Gonzaga walked through the woods, killing birds with a slingshot. Granpapi did not think this consistent with his image of sainthood. He could not reconcile the hypocrisy of these teachings with true spirituality. But when a man named Alfonso visited the school to encourage the kids to join the Catholic Youth, Granpapi listened intently. Alfonso’s words impacted Granpapi to the extent that he eventually converted to Catholicism and joined the group.

Though he was at Marist Brothers for only three years, the Catholic Youth remained a priority even after he returned to a newly-built public school for his junior and senior years. In 1939, he graduated and moved to Havana to attend the university. Once there, he represented the province of Las Villas to the National Council of the Catholic Youth. He eventually became the editor of the Catholic Youth Action Magazine and National Vice-President of the Catholic Youth. It was through this involvement that his path would lead him to his future wife, my Granmami.

María del Carmen was the third child born to Gustavo and Josefa Riera. Gustavo had been born in Sitges, Spain. He lived in Barcelona until he was seventeen. One of thirteen kids,

he left Spain for Cuba to "*correr fortuna*," or make his fortune. He soon established himself as a trader of material, often making trips to New York City to procure new fabrics and make orders for his clothing store in Havana called "La Yarda." On one of these trips, at the moment of embarkment, a Cuban couple brought a young girl up to him, explaining that she had received this trip as a graduation gift. They asked Gustavo if he would show the girl and her chaperone parts of the city, as he was knowledgeable of New York. Her name was Josefa Villafuerte Vallete. Born in 1895, she was fourteen years Gustavo's junior. They soon became engaged and married in 1913.

A son, Tavito, was born in 1914 at the onset of WWI. As the war ended, a daughter, Pepita, was born. It was said in the family that Tavito started the war and Pepita ended it. In 1923, Granmami came into the world on a trip to Barcelona. It was Gustavo's wish that his third child be born in Spain before they returned to Cuba. She was taught to take pride in her Catalonian blood. She came from the Spanish Catholic tradition and was educated at the Sacred Heart School.

Tavito became the President of the Catholic Youth, until 1939, when he married his first wife, Mercy. About that time, his sister, Pepita suddenly disappeared. Ironically, she had been engaged to the same Alfonso who had visited the Marist Brothers School and made such an impression on Granpapi. No one initially knew what had happened to Pepita, and she had failed to contact her family regarding her whereabouts. She was eventually discovered to be at a convent in Santiago de Cuba, across the island. The Riera household began to crumble.

Shortly afterward, Gustavo died in 1940 of complications after an operation for cancer of the larynx. Granmami focused her energies in the Catholic Youth, organizing a national convention. During a trip to Cárdenas, she walked along the white sands of Varadero Beach. It was there she met Granpapi. He was a member of the National Council, and she was the President of the Council of the Diocese in Havana. But the first bloom of love was soon tarnished by another tragedy. In 1941, her mother died following surgery of an ovarian cyst. She hemorrhaged and died in Granmami's arms.

An orphan now and still a teenager, Granmami moved in with her older brother and his wife, Mercy. After the deaths of both parents due to surgery, she lost faith in the abilities of physicians and vowed never to marry one of its breed. However, Granpapi also was a talented and dedicated poet, and he won her over with his affections. "Carmita y Rubén" became an indivisible unit whose love would span more than fifty years. Granpapi attended medical school during their engagement, and graduated in 1946 with a medical degree. At the Emergency Hospital in Havana, he did residential training in anesthesiology.

They were married in 1947 and moved to a small apartment. Thus began a period of transition. They had no car, but the hospital was within walking distance of the apartment. Also, Havana had a public mass transit system. As part of his residency, there was a designated series of nights in which Granpapi had to sleep in the hospital. This lasted two years, until he was offered a position there, which he accepted. In 1951, he transferred to the National Cancer Hospital as a staff member. He did private practice with some surgeons to supplement his salary, and also taught anatomy and physiology at the Belén Jesuit School. His response to keeping up such a pace was not so much ambition, but that "necessity is the mother of invention."

In January of 1952, Granpapi was chosen as one of about sixteen delegates to attend a Seminar on Contemporary Social Problems, conducted by Father Lombardi in Bogotá, Colombia. After WWII, this Italian priest began preaching about the “urgency of a worldwide spiritual regeneration and profound atonement for the horrible devastation brought by war” (Part I, "Cuba's Destiny," 1990, Rumbaut). Through use of the Vatican Radio and later taking to the street, he spread his message on reconstruction of the world based on morality and compassion.

He traveled worldwide, crossing the Atlantic, visiting North, South, and Central America. Before returning to Europe, he wanted to meet with delegates from each of the Latin American countries he had visited. He discussed the church and each nation. Afterward, outside the convent, he singled out the Cuban delegates to join him in a garden.

There he told them how Cubans had not heeded his words when he visited the island, while people had responded to his call in every other country. Since WWII had not affected Cuba directly, Cubans were unresponsive, uncompassionate, insensitive, and frivolous. In his opinion, they were not in touch with the pain of the world. On the patio at sunset, with an impressive view of the mountains, the Cuban delegates listened as Lombardi warned that the pain of the world would descend upon them soon. He predicted that Cuba would pay her quota of suffering.

Disconcerted and shocked, the delegates returned to Cuba. Everything seemed normal there, and Granpapi told Granmami of Lombardi's words. Cuba was a free, democratic, prosperous society, advancing into a new age. There seemed no hint of impending doom. Then two months later, out of the blue, General Fulgencio Batista (a senator) staged a *coup d'etat* and took power from President Prío. Suddenly, the foundations of government and the Constitution began to crumble. This oppression lasted seven years, only to make way for the regime of Fidel Castro. Cuba was certainly beginning to pay her share of suffering. And Granpapi was one of the dozen men who had witnessed the forecast.

By now, Granmami and Granpapi had been blessed with three sons. The first, Rubén Gustavo, was born in 1948. Luis was born in 1949, and Carlos in the following year. Granmami had worked before the war, which was not customary; many Cuban women did not work, especially with only a high school education. While the boys were young, she continued to work from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. at a subsidiary of Procter & Gamble until Miryam was born in 1953. It was not until after the birth of Carmen in 1955 that she resumed work, collaborating on a magazine for the Caribbean by Esso (Exxon), translating and verifying facts.

When Granpapi got a job as an anesthesiologist in an emergency hospital, they moved from their apartment to a single-family home. Granpapi began to observe firsthand the effects of death upon people, which fueled his natural inclination to study the socio-psychological aspect of man. While at the National Cancer Hospital, Granpapi decided he would like to delve into psychiatry. The first step was to make contact with a group of psychoanalysts in Havana. He joined the group with his mentor, Dr. José Gurri, an orthodox psychoanalyst trained in Boston in unconscious motivations.

As if this new interest did not demand enough of his time, Granpapi returned to school to study journalism. He had promised Bienvenido he would get a journalism degree and follow in the family footsteps. In 1957, he graduated from the Marquez Sterling Journalism School in



Havana, first in his class. As valedictorian, he was offered a scholarship to travel, which he declined. He had the responsibility to provide for his family. Three years later, they fled Cuba.

Once in exile, the Rumbauts eventually moved into a house in Miami proper. Comparisons to their former home were inevitable. The sofa springs were loose and protruded through the cushions. More than one person was cut by the springs. Their house in Havana had had a large chandelier in the living room, consisting of dozens of pieces of cut glass. But the "chandelier" in the Miami dining room consisted of a glass dish that hung from chains. The house had been left unclean when the Rumbauts moved in. Granmami began her first of many lessons in cleaning and maintaining a house, tasks which for the most part had been delegated to maids her whole life. In the process, they discovered chicken bones within the light fixture. Luis elaborates on the decor:

*"The kitchen ceiling had a spray of black dots over the stove, as if a pressure cooker with black beans, abandoned, had exploded up into it. When we left, I argued with Mami, who wanted us to leave the house clean--not like we found it. The laundry was a sink in the backyard, next to the clothesline. Mami did not enjoy doing the laundry and air-drying for seven people, by hand."*

Granmami's hands, kept beautifully manicured in Cuba with long, red nails, now cracked and bled and stiffened and ached constantly from the massive amount of hand-washing required in a large family. This was a huge adjustment to make from her previous lifestyle. Most of her childhood had been a comfortable existence. But this was part of the sacrifice of exile. To come to a new country with no money, where she had to spend hours of physical labor just to hold the threads of family together, required an enormous amount of character and perseverance.

In 1960, Miami had its share of people who believed that Cubans slept in trees like monkeys, washed their clothes in rivers, and escaped to this country in banana boats. Rubén recalls a fourteen-year-old boy at St. Michael's asking him through an interpreter if Cubans wore loincloths and swung on vines from tree to tree with spears. Amidst such ignorance, the children were inducted into the reality of ethnic relations. Miryam concedes:

*"People did assume we were uneducated. The most ignorant question people asked me was, after seeing me wearing pierced earrings, if my nose was pierced, too! Girls back then did not pierce their ears, much less right after they were born!"*

Luis writes of one particular American who made an impression:

*"The Ugly American down the block was named Al, I think. He was the first one to ask me about loincloths and running water. He tended to bully the kids on the block, and when somebody complained, he would say, "It's a free country!" Once some big kid came into our backyard and took all the toy soldiers we had laid out in the backyard battlefield (also the site for some complex channel-and-dam systems made from mud and the occasional Carlos-inspired Big Circus, with someone dropping from a tree branch into the plastic mini-pool underneath).*

*"Possibly the coolest piece of equipment they took was the little sandbags we used to fortify the trenches. I went to the kid's house up the street, rang the bell, and told his*

*father about the theft, secure in the power of authority to right wrongs. He said I was lying and shooed me away. The kids, angry, then threw the sandbags up into a palm tree in their front yard, where they lodged between the fronds at the base, twenty feet in the air.”*

But sadly, it was not only the ignorance of children that affected the siblings, but the ignorance of adults as well. A particular teacher had taught Carlos the color chart, explaining primary, secondary, and complimentary colors. Unlike grammar or social studies, this was “real and beautiful and made perfect sense. I was enchanted with the color chart for days.” Finally a teacher had made a positive impact on him, and consequently earned his respect. But it would not last long. Carlos explains:

*“Another time, that same teacher was telling us about South America. She asked what the shape of the continent reminded us of, but no one answered right away. She said some people thought it looked like an ice cream cone or a ham. Then she digressed into the subject of Cuba and how it had been taken over by Communists. She said Americans would never allow that. ‘If a boatful of Communists tried to land on our shores,’ she said, ‘we wouldn’t let them in.’ I hated her for saying that. I knew it wasn’t that simple and I knew she had somehow put me and my family down, but I wasn’t clear how. My eyes teared up. When I went home, I told my mother what that teacher said. And I never liked her again, even if she had taught me the color chart.”*

But these were not the only rites of passage for the Rumbaut children. One concept that proved hard to swallow was the fact that food could be reduced to powder. The Cuban Refugee Center, once it got going, offered rations of powdered milk, powdered eggs, and jars of peanut butter to help feed the Cubans. Miryam was especially fond of the powdered milk, and hunger led Carlos to pilfering store-bought sugar cubes from the box in the cupboard.

Mari Carmen remembers insisting that she had not raided the powdered milk and becoming angry that everyone had unjustly accused her. That is, until she saw the reflection of her crying face in the bathroom mirror and noticed the white circle around her mouth that had given her away. She now confesses, “sneaking into the kitchen and stealing powdered milk and egg, which I crammed into my mouth as fast as possible.”

But no matter how hungry they were, the kids could never quite grow accustomed to the taste of peanut butter. Rubén recalls:

*“It stuck to the top of your palate, and at first I just couldn't hack it. Many years later, at a conference at Smith College in Massachusetts in 1985 on the ‘sociology of exile,’ I proposed the use of peanut butter as a quantitative index of acculturation/assimilation to American life, observing that the younger the person on U.S. arrival, the more quickly he/she accepted peanut butter, while adults almost unvaryingly rejected it as an alien presence in one’s body.”*

So, while exiled Cubans happily consumed powdered foods, the cans of peanut butter accumulated in the pantry closets of Cuban refugees throughout the city. When they moved from a home, they inevitably left the cans behind. Letters to the Editor in the Miami newspaper noted how ungrateful the Cubans were, that they left perfectly good food untouched. The growing reputation did nothing to aid ethnic relations.

Granpapi decided he would attempt to solve the conflict. As peanut butter has a rather oily consistency, Granpapi resolved to fry something in it. He decided to find a practical use for the sticky substance. He turned on the gas stove and spread a griddle with the peanut butter. It began to heat up. Just then the phone rang, and he rushed out of the kitchen to answer it. True to Granpapi's natural propensity for communication, the phone conversation began to develop a momentum. Meanwhile, so did the peanut butter.

Granpapi then heard shouting. He glanced outside and noticed it was his neighbors. What did they want? The familia Pérez was screaming at him. He ran into the kitchen, and found himself consumed by black smoke. Struggling to fetch his breath, he began to douse the pan with water, almost choking on the smoke. Finally, the fire and smoke were out. The griddle was ruined. And boy, did he hear it when Granmami got home. So much for aiding the reputation of peanut butter.

Luis remembers his first bite. His aunt Pepita, then out of the convent, offered him a peanut butter sandwich, and as he had no idea what it was, he accepted.

*“The stuff was sticking to all of the tissues of my mouth, and nothing but time could remove it, neutralize its taste, or calm its emetic effect... The powdered eggs were as magical as the frozen juice had been (powdered eggs!) and the mystery meat (corned beef?) was satisfying, especially if there was any left on Starvation Tuesdays. But the oily stuff, no way. Later, Rubén figured out my aversion. When he felt the need to establish himself as alpha male in the pack, he would twist off the top of any handy peanut butter jar and chase me around the house, holding it under my nose. Even today I cannot eat peanuts, nuts in general, or things that aren't nuts but that remind me of them or sound like them, like coconuts.”*

But other food obstacles had to be overcome, such as pronunciation. One realization was made in an attempt to sell lemons door-to-door. A fecund backyard provided a home to orange trees, a lime tree, an avocado tree, an oak, and a lemon tree. The kids would fill a bag with the fruit and try to sell it to neighbors, some of whom had lemon trees of their own. It was then that they were told to pronounce it "lemon," not "leemon."

One day in Miami, Granmami sent Luis to a butcher shop to get some palomilla. She advised him that it was called "round steak" here in the States. He practiced the sound over and over as he walked the few blocks to the store—"raundesteic, raundesteic, raundesteic..." He got in line behind a man, while silently repeating the password. He heard the man tell the butcher to give him "a couple of pounds of palomilla," pronouncing the word like "sasparilla." Shocked, Luis turned to face him and yelled, "RAUNDESTEIC!"

The language barrier made for miscommunication at school as well. Luis recalls,

*“I liked school. We never got any homework, which I knew because I listened carefully at the end of every class for the word, and it was never used. Some time into the course, I found myself taken to the principal's office, where the teacher shook her finger at me and spoke in upset tones about me, until I could make out that she was saying, ‘And he never does his **assignment!**’ It was like Helen Keller discovering that water had a name.”*

Mari Carmen agrees that the lack of vocabulary made for some uneasy situations:

*“I knew that there would always be something that everyone else knew that I hadn't been told. And I tried very hard to assimilate and get rid of my accent. (To this day I feel fear crossing the border, worried that my accent will return when the guard asks me if I am an American citizen—‘Jess, ser!’)”*

Perspective is the defining factor in the way you choose to remember the pieces of your life. Looking back, Luis is able to share the humor in his situations. Mari Carmen, who had to wear glasses from an early age, may have been nearsighted in more than one way. Mari Carmen told Miryam years later, *“Yes, our ages made a difference. But also our personalities. I am amazed at how positively you view some of the events which still hurt me to think about today.”*

Miryam experienced uncomfortable situations, but reflected positively on their effects.

*“I remember being asked to read in third grade out loud to the class and I pronounced every word as if it was written in Spanish and the teacher correcting me and the kids laughing. Nevertheless, I truly don't count myself as having had an unlucky childhood. I am glad of what we went through, as it was something much more educational than anything one could read or learn about. I sometimes compare that time in our lives to other times that may have been difficult for me, and it doesn't even come close. So in comparison, I feel as if I am always going to be okay.”*

Inevitably, the kids did adapt, as they assimilated into the neighborhood and made friends. In the absence of toys, the children had to find imaginative ways to play. It rained often in Miami, and kids would bodysurf the street gutters, swollen with running water. Carlos recalls a dirty crawl space under the house being used as a secret clubhouse for neighborhood boys like Al and Fonchi. “Fonchi and I would catch lizards and inject them with bleach to see how they died. Fonchi had a slingshot that he was proud to use to shoot birds.” Carlos continues:

*“Our block had a lot of kids, and we found ways to have fun without leaving the street. Late summer, our bonanza of lemons would turn into rotting ammunition for the street-wide lemon fights. Some of the bigger boys like Jim Bell had a terrible advantage over us smaller ones, but we picked teams and stepped into the fray. Jim called his father ‘sir’ when he spoke to him; that struck me as unnaturally formal. I developed a crush on his sister, Julie, but did nothing about it except get teased by others.”*

Enter the Henry J.—a car purchased by Granpapi for \$89. A post-WWII dark green vehicle, it was nicknamed the "Big Hornet" for its color and "the music box" for the amount of noise it made. It had no trunk, but behind the backseat was a space that could not be accessed from the outside. The kids called it "The Pirate's Cave." The car came fully equipped with big holes in the floor that allowed geysers of water to spurt up every time it traveled over puddles of water. The kids would yell, "Go here! Go there!" and make a game of it while Granpapi tried to dodge the puddles. And it was always raining in Miami.

The passenger seat had a hole in the cushion, which had to be covered with a blanket. The car also possessed the unique ability to die at every stoplight, and its transmission would get stuck shifting from first to second gear every few blocks. Rubén Gustavo would then open the hood, reach in, and pull the transmission to allow it to go into the next gear.

One day, going home in the car, Granpapi made a wide turn. There were no seatbelts, and when the door accidentally opened wide, his daughter Mari Carmen slid out of the car. It was as if she slid out at a smooth horizontal angle on a "magic carpet" before landing in the street on all fours. Granpapi retrieved the crying girl, who hobbled back into the car with her scraped knees.

The car lasted thirteen months, during which Granpapi sometimes sat inside it to study English and medicine. It expired immediately after he took his exams. He sold it for \$20, to a man who simply wanted the tires.

Once they had moved to the home in Miami proper, Granmami wanted the children to attend parochial school. An American couple spoke with her and explained that a Catholic school, St. Michael's, was within walking distance. When Granmami went there to enroll the kids, she was told that the students had already registered. They would not accept any late students. But Granmami was determined. She marched straight to the bishop's office, but his secretary told her he was busy. Granmami said she would wait. So she sat in the waiting room, flipping through *The Voice* (the Catholic newspaper), keeping herself occupied.

In Cuba, Granpapi had been a correspondent for the *Catholic News*, writing initially about Batista's demise with enthusiasm. Later, he continued writing to the Washington, D.C. office about the deteriorating situation, and how they were expelling priests from the church. As it happened, his four-column article was published in that very edition that Granmami was reading. She jumped up, excited, and showed the receptionist. "My husband wrote this and I want to see the bishop!" A few moments later, she got to see the bishop.

She had brought with her the excellent grade reports of her three boys who had gone to Jesuit school. The bishop was sympathetic. Two days later, Granmami called the nuns. Mother Superior was very accommodating. Granmami explained that, "The only problem is I have some girls, too." Miryam was accepted, but Mari Carmen, of kindergarten age, had to be driven to a different school.

Once she was old enough to attend St. Michael's, Carmen continued to have problems. "My brothers were told to help walk me to school and we would all leave the house together, but as soon as we were out of sight, they would run off, and I had NO idea of how to get to school."

You could take the boy out of Cuba, but St. Michael's could not take Cuba out of the boy. Of pledging allegiance to the flag, Rubén G. recalls,

*"I resisted being forced to make that "false" pledge, but could not do so in a publicly defiant way. So my solution was to go along with the others until we got to the part about 'the flag of the United States of America,' and instead I'd just mutter between my teeth 'to the flag of... Cuba! ...' and then continue with the ritual."*

These little rebellions allowed the young man to retain a small piece of his former identity.

Now that the children's schooling was settled, Granpapi had to find means of supporting his family. He continued to publish articles in the *Catholic News*, which contributed to his income. Soon, he founded with others the Cuban Medical Association in Exile. He began receiving mail in that regard. One letter was from a man preparing a thesis in political science. He offered to pay Granpapi money to complete his survey of exiles. Granpapi did twenty to forty interviews with exiles for him--receiving an unexpected source of income. He would take it wherever he could. When Granpapi left Cuba in 1960, a patient of his had owed him fifty dollars. When the patient later moved to Miami, he honored his debt and paid Granpapi the money. It was a welcome payback.

Money was tight, to say the least. Mari Carmen remembers,

*"We were poor kids! I remember feeling terribly guilty that the folks would have to spend money on my eyeglasses because I knew they didn't have it. I got used to hand-me-downs from my older siblings. And shoes that were way too tight because the feet grew and there was no money for new shoes."*

Miryam's point of view is a bit different:

*"I did not feel like a poor kid. Mami and Papi made us feel special, and gave me the impression that I was smarter than other kids in the U.S. I did not feel 'non-white' but I certainly did feel different but not necessarily in a negative way."*

Rubén G. agrees:

*"I never once felt 'inferior' in the USA; as Miryam mentioned, I always had a (parent-reinforced) 'Cuban is Beautiful' attitude; and coming from a city of 2 million people, with a University founded in the early 1700's, etc, to a sleepy resort town like Miami where the ignorance of some was proven without a doubt every time comments like the above were made, only convinced me of the truth of those perceptions. The status of Papi as a writer, physician, etc., and the self-evident right of our 'cause' and our principles, always undergirded all such concerns, and our equally self-evident 'poverty' (of lack of money only, never of worth or of principle or of identity)."*

In trying to tell the story of the Banana Boat, I started to recognize how differently one member of the family could perceive an event from another. But history is what we choose to remember, so I had to consider all the sources. I relied heavily upon Granpapi, who, as an adult during these experiences, should have the most reliable memory, not one prey to the discoloration of childhood reflection. Though it is a common story, each individual had separate

experiences that would shape him or her, and different attitudes that defined them. Rubén G. says:

*“Exile is, among other things, a sort of Post-Traumatic Stress; and our “Banana Boat” stories are a bit like steps to recovery, discovery, restoring (re-storying) a coherent narrative. If stability of character depends on a coherent notion of one’s past--on a narrative that relates the formative episodes which give rise to one’s identity--then maybe the threats to coherence unleashed by the modern fragmentation of experience... can be offset through attention to the stories we tell about our lives, making sense of our experience by interpreting our actions as part of a coherent life story. Then when a sudden/unexpected/novel event occurs (e.g., exile), we weave it into our narrative so that the story continues to make sense over time.”*

Or, as Carlos says:

*“As individuals, we grow in understanding by pulling our experiences together into a coherent pattern. That pattern provides a meaning to our lives. But after a while the pattern is strained; it no longer fits our experience. Then we have to pull apart the pattern and reassemble it, working it into new material. So we grow in cycles of clarity and confusion, of getting it together and watching it fall apart.”*

In the mornings, Granpapi would go to the University of Miami in Coral Gables to take an accelerated course in English. He began to take these courses after the failure of the Bay of Pigs Invasion in April 1961, which made it clear that the family's exile in the U.S. would be prolonged indefinitely. Then in the afternoon, he attended a medical refresher course at Jackson Memorial College, sponsored by the American Medical Association. Fellow Cuban doctors had difficulty with the Foreign Medical Exam, created by the Educational Council for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG). Cubans called it "The Foreign" and it was conducted twice a year in English.

For one, the English abbreviations did not make sense to them. They had no idea "BRP" meant "bathroom privilege," nor did they know "MOM" was "Milk of Magnesia." One Cuban was particularly confused when the instructor spoke of a "toxic foot" during instructions for an exam question. It was not until later that they determined the instructor had said "toxic food." On the upside, the units were metric, the same as the Cuban system.

Granpapi wasn't the only one facing acronym dilemmas. Carlos had problems of his own. In addition to trying to figure out what "Heavens to Mergatroy!" meant, he still could not grasp the English language.

*“In class the teachers would talk and talk and I would understand nothing. One of them, a tall blond man, would get upset at student and write “MYOB” in large letters on the blackboard. When he said aloud, “Mind your own business,” I knew he meant it as some formula for proper conduct. All the teachers and nuns were always telling us formulas for proper conduct. What I eventually understood was that I would have to use my mind when I had a business some day.”*

Despite the language barriers and the discrimination, America offered the political freedom that Cuba did not. Regardless of the obstacles, the Rumbauts were becoming more American every day, and Cuba was becoming less and less the island it had been. Perhaps they second-guessed their exile at times, wondered what would have happened if they'd stayed behind. But as Carlos notes, "They would have suffered greatly under Castro, in a different way than they suffered under exile. And we all survived and thrived in this country, and made it our own."

Some days were survived by sheer miracles. One day in Miami, Granpapi and Granmami sat on the porch and realized they were completely out of money, had no food in the house, and had borrowed all they could. While murmuring to each other, hoping the kids wouldn't hear, the postman arrived. In the mail was a check from the phone company, returning their deposit due to their faithful six months' payment of phone bills.

For the first six months in exile, Granpapi was involved in the fight against Castro. He was working in the Christian Democratic Party (CDP), and the members decided he was valuable as a newspaperman and physician. They chose him to be a delegate for a meeting of sister parties in Buenos Aires, Argentina. At the same time, he was chosen as a delegate of the Pan-American Journalists to attend a meeting in Lima, Peru.

After the Bay of Pigs fiasco, their exile was indefinite, so when the "Foreign" was offered in October of that year, Granpapi decided to take it. He received his results in November. He passed. The Coral Gables Veterans Administration (V.A.) Hospital was offering positions to new physicians if they were willing to work in the system. Granpapi agreed. The physician recruiter asked Granpapi if he would be willing to relocate. He replied that he would.

During the conversation, the recruiter inquired with whom Granpapi had previously worked. Granpapi explained that he had shared an office with a female doctor who was his "roommate." So green in English, his implications were misinterpreted by the recruiter until it was made clear that she had worked in a room next door. Later, he asked Granpapi where he got his income. Income? What was "income"? The recruiter decided that Granpapi could best hone his skills in the V.A. system in New Mexico, where he could use his Spanish ability. He was told that New Mexico was good for allergy sufferers, and for Carlos' asthma. Granpapi, the head of the family, had to make the decision. He accepted the invitation.

Granmami was not thrilled when she heard the news. As if moving to a new country and learning a new language weren't enough, she wasn't optimistic about moving to another state. She had the notion that Albuquerque was out in the boondocks; this later became the brunt of jokes regarding living among the cowboys and Indians. She liked big cities. She liked civilization and cement under her feet. And she liked to cling to the hope that Cuba would soon be her home again.

But Miami was a constant reminder of the defeat at the Bay of Pigs, and it would be best to move on with their lives as long as the possibility of moving back to Cuba was hopeless. The Refugee Center, which had been paying their rent, proved useful in giving the Rumbauts cold-weather apparel, including a camel's hair coat for Granpapi. It took three to four weeks to prepare for the move, and they celebrated Christmas in Miami. On December 28, 1961, the



family moved to Albuquerque. When they arrived, it was late Friday afternoon. Granpapi immediately showed up for work, so that he could be added to the Friday, Saturday, and Sunday payroll.

Transition seems to be a key word here. New Mexico offered them a welcome of extreme cold and snow akin to a slap in the face. This was nothing like the tropical paradise they had known, nothing like even Miami. They had no choice but to stay inside during the freezing weather, in a wooden barrack with central heat, except for the bathroom. Often, one or two of the children would escape to headquarters to sleep in the rooms of one of their single physician friends. Granmami hung their clothes out on the clothesline, and watched them grow stiff and frozen.

Yet within this upheaval lay opportunity. In the 1976 joint article by Rubén Darío and Rubén Gustavo, "The Family in Exile: Cuban Expatriates in the United States," they assert that unknown environments and strangers allow for "a vigorous challenge to survive, adapt, and grow, and even the opportunity of constructing a new identity in sudden anonymity." Sixteen years after their own exile, they were able to recognize a strength of character that one acquires in such circumstances. They also realized that like themselves, Cuba had evolved, and that they shared a "wish to return to a Cuba that no longer exists."

The article points out that many survivors of exile excel in their pursuits, that Cuban children often rose to the top of their classes in "spelling, grammar, reading, and writing in English, while keeping an adequate Spanish vocabulary." By the time the family moved to Albuquerque, the Rumbaut boys had proven their academic skills. All three went to Boys' State, a program that encouraged young men to learn about politics "hands on" by creating their own political state for one week. The candidates were pre-selected by their teachers but ultimately selected by fellow students through applause. They were asked to give a speech in front of the school, explaining what democracy meant to them.

Rubén Gustavo was about fifteen years old when he delivered his speech. He gave examples of his own life, of how the U.S. had given him freedom from Communism. The next year, Luis had the same opportunity, and he used the same technique. He gave the immigrant story again. The third year, when Carlos was selected, the students, who had heard the story before, told him, *"If you give us the Banana Boat Story again, we will shout you out."* So instead, he told of how his older brothers had already given great speeches, and that he would get an inferiority complex if he could not measure up to their achievements. Carlos, too, went to Boys' State because he received the most applause. Thus, the story of the "Banana Boat" was born.

They lived on campus in V.A. headquarters until a fellow physician offered to rent them a house thirty to forty blocks from the hospital. Then Granpapi bought a used car, a very used Ford station wagon for \$500. A step up from the Henry J., no doubt. Although Granpapi had passed his Foreign, that did not mean he could practice as a fully-credentialed physician. In reality he was only able to practice in the V.A. system. Three days of yet another medical exam would be necessary to obtain full credentials. He chose to take the exam in Texas, which would later become his home.

There they were, smack dab in the middle of the turbulent sixties. As if a U.S. culture shock weren't enough for the forty-something parents, the country itself was experiencing

counter-culture shock with not only hippies, but the war in Vietnam and the issue of Civil Rights. Granmami grew depressed. Topeka had no inviting sea like Miami, no beautiful mountains like Albuquerque. It was flat country. Far from the cultural meccas of the east and west. And Bienvenido would have called it culturally lacking. Granmami gave lectures, trying to be active. But the sixties were not the best years for her.

In particular, 1963 had proved a rotten year, even without the assassination of the President. At the end of 1962 (the year of the Cuban Missile Crisis), Granmami discovered she was pregnant again. In February, her beloved only brother, Tavito, died. Granmami and Granpapi left the five kids with a social worker friend and got on a plane for North Carolina, his home. As they got off a plane in Dallas for a layover, whom should they spy but Carucha, Granpapi's younger sister by fifteen years, and her husband Tony? Tony had just been released from prison for the Bay of Pigs incident, and he and a pregnant Carucha and their daughter, Estela, were moving to Albuquerque to stay with the Rumbauts until they got on their feet again.

After the funeral, March came and brought Granmami's fortieth birthday. She was five months pregnant. With the gloomy cloud following the Rumbauts, it seems only natural that Granpapi's friends suggested names for the baby as "Disparate" for the boy or "Barbaridad" for the girl. Michelle was born in July. Then María Aurora was born to Carucha in October. Luis recalls the circumstances at the time:

*Life must have been cramped at the house, although I did not realize it at the time. The three boys eventually shared a room stacked with bunk beds. The girls had another room. Papi and Mami had theirs. Somehow, at some point, Carucha and her family had another room. That was 10 ½ people in one little house. For a time, I was assigned an army cot (from the invasion, also from Sunny's Surplus?) that was not like today's lightweight aluminum-and-synthetic cots. The fabric was canvas, the hardware was steel, and the frame was solid wood. To make it stay up, you had to insert cross pieces at the ends, under pressure, in between the side rails, in a procedure designed to catch loose folds of skin. Mami thought it was terrible that I had to do that every day, but I didn't see anything unusual about it.*

(And Tony practiced his classical guitar six to eight hours a day in that house...)

One might think that Granpapi's medical education was exhausted at this point. Not even close. By 1965, Granpapi was ready to begin the training for specialization. One must train for three years in order to specialize. Granpapi, ever aiming for the stars, longed to train at the Menninger Clinic, the best school of psychiatry in the nation. He also knew there were fellow Cubans there. But he had only been in New Mexico for just over four years. Was he ready for another move? Apparently, career took precedence.

Now another decision had to be made. Granpapi had the choice to go to Menninger and earn the salary of a resident, or he could enter Career Residency Training. This required a promise to give Menninger two years of service after training. However, during these five years of training, he would receive a higher salary. But this meant that the Rumbauts would have to remain in Topeka for five years instead of three. The reality that the U.S. was proving a permanent home was hard to accept. Rubén maintains:

*"When we came in July 1960, Papi had a fairly clear sense that we would be back HOME soon, maybe as soon as that very Christmas—it was always only a provisional*

*move, not a change of identity or what-have-you. 'Next Year Jerusalem (Cuba)' was a mantra-like hope, if not rock-solid conviction. And we certainly were raised in the USA in that context, always knowing, each in our own age-limited way, that 'home' was elsewhere."*

There was also the issue of the children, though they weren't all children anymore. Rubén G. had already moved from home in 1965 and was attending Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. Luis graduated high school in June 1966 with a National Merit Scholarship. Though an educational accomplishment, it also meant that the Parents' Confidential Statement would be solicited, explaining why the student needed financial aid. Granmami had prepared one for Rubén, and she was embarrassed to repeat the Banana Boat Story again. But she wanted Luis to go to college and follow Rubén's lead, especially since he had followed Rubén to Washington University in St. Louis.

Miryam and Carlos had to face the jolt of being snagged from a familiar school yet again and placed into an unknown environment. Carlos, for one, was none too eager to spend his final year of high school with a group of strangers, but he had no choice in the matter. As an offering of compensation when he graduated, Granmami and Granpapi sent him by train to attend the graduation in Albuquerque of his former classmates. Life had become permanently temporary.

Within a month of their move to the new house in Topeka, Kansas, they received word that Bienvenido had passed away in Cuba. He had suffered a stroke. Born in 1890, he had lived a full 76 years. Now a widow, Zoila Rosa was determined to join her children in the United States. In 1969, she left Cuba for Mexico, where she stayed for two months. Then she got a visa to Miami, and a month later went to Los Angeles, where Carucha and family were living. She would live for several more years, long enough to see her first two great-grandchildren born, then pass away in August of 1977.

By the time Zoila Rosa left Cuba, only the three daughters remained with their parents in the house. Meanwhile, Granpapi was wrapping up his residency training. In addition, Granpapi was obliged to prepare a third-year thesis. He presented it to his fellow specialists of psychiatry. He was first in his class again, but this time in English. Out of this thesis was born "John of God," a biography that was later published as a book in a bilingual edition. For this, he received the Distinguished Writing Award, a mounted profile of Freud which hangs in his den today.

In Topeka, Granpapi was active in the American Psychiatric Association (APA) and the V.A., attending national meetings. During a meeting in St. Louis, he met the Chairman of Psychiatry at the Baylor College of Medicine, who offered him the opportunity to come work at the Veterans Administration Medical Center in Houston, Texas—which serves as one of Baylor's training hospitals—where there were available positions in the psychiatric department. Granpapi accepted the offer pending completion of his five-year commitment to the Menninger. And so it was that, in 1971, the family, now reduced to two parents and the two youngest daughters, moved to Houston, Texas. The following year, in which he attained yet another title—grandfather, or "Granpapi"—he took the first of two written exams. In 1973, he took and passed the oral and Final Board exam, given by the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology.

While Granpapi worked at the V.A. Medical Center—where he began as a staff physician in the psychiatry department and eventually served as Director of its Day Hospital and later Assistant Chief—he also moved up the academic ladder at Baylor’s medical school, from instructor to assistant professor to associate professor and full professor. When he retired from the V.A., he assumed full-time duties at Baylor until he retired as Professor Emeritus from the medical school.

In 1976, he was distinguished as a Fellow in the APA. Through the APA, he became editor of the newsletter for Hispanic psychiatrists for ten years. In 1995, he was invited by the APA to give a Special Lecture at the national convention of psychiatrists in Miami Beach. He was to give the Simón Bolívar lecture. Entitled "The Ibero-American Contribution to the History of Psychiatry," it was the first in the 150-year history of the APA given in Spanish. The onetime banana-boater had become a success story.

But we must remember that Granpapi would not have been able to achieve any of these things without his partner in life, Granmami. It was she who was the emotional center of the family, she who did the cooking and cleaning and childrearing. She stayed home so that he did not have to. While he was attending classes to earn his many titles, Granmami was struggling to maintain hers: Mami.

But she received recognition of her own. As a result of her intense work in the Catholic Youth during the 1940's, she received the *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice* award given by the Pope Pius XII in 1956. This was a merit bestowed by the Vatican upon a few people in Havana, and it was presented in a ceremony to Granmami by the Cardinal of Cuba. She brought it with her from Cuba, and her children were not aware of it until it was discovered after her death.

It was not until Granmami was fifty years old and left with one child in the home that she began to climb a career ladder of her own. With only a high school education, she was determined to focus her energies and talents into something other than her children. She went to an interview at Texas Commerce Bank in Houston and took the math ability test, in which she received a perfect score with time to spare. She was hired as a clerk, and was not too proud to take the entry-level position. In addition to speaking Spanish and English, she also spoke French. She was punctual, efficient, well-mannered, and attentive to the needs of others. The bank recognized this, and she quickly became an officer and eventually the director of a unit within the International Department. By the time she retired at age 62, she held the title of Vice-President of the bank. But no matter what her career status, her family was always her proudest achievement.

Granmami documented the family's first two years in the United States in a scrapbook that she kept, along with photos. Through this, written in her native Spanish, we can not only learn history, but the emotions that went with it. In addition, these journal entries were written in six-month intervals, so that we gain a sense of her feelings at the time and the sense of urgency, rather than the memories of a forty-year retrospective. My father, Carlos, and I translated her words, and I have chosen to delete none of them, as they are all relevant. Here is the Banana Boat Story, in the words of my grandmother.

\*\*\*\*\*

## From Granmami's Album: Our First Year in Exile

*Miami - January 16, 1961*

Today is the six-month anniversary of our stay in this city of Miami, where we came, Rubén and I, with our five children on the sixteenth of July last year, fleeing the barbarity of the Communist regime that Fidel Castro had wanted to install in our fatherland. This has been one of the most transcendental and one of the most emotional stages of our married life, highlighted with dramatic and original incidents, so that I can't keep from jotting down my impressions in a scrapbook, the same as we have done with the other periods of our marriage.

Even though the album was bought almost immediately after reaching the North American lands, it hasn't been possible for me to start it until today, in which we mark our first half-year of exile. Even though the interest to carry this out was great, this exile distinguishes itself principally in the total lack of free time, so that at last I started today, making a real sacrifice to take time out in which to write.

After the six months of living away from Cuba, the horrible occurrences that have been happening there each time give us the certainty that we were right in leaving in time, at the same time that we hold onto the hope that this year which we have started will be the year of the liberation and the return. In God we trust that that will be!

With the fall of the dictator, Fulgencio Batista, the first of January 1959, all Cubans were filled with an optimism, foreseeing for Cuba happy days in the hands of the leader of the revolution, Fidel Castro, who would unite all the sectors that had brought down the tyrant and would quickly take our country into a peaceful, democratic, and prosperous climate. As the months passed, however, our limited enthusiasm of the beginning turned into distrust. Rubén started to suspect in May of 1959, with the proposal, or rather, the implementation of the famous "Law of Agrarian Reform," in which one could see clearly Communist intentions.

I was more naive and I kept my faith until the twenty-sixth of October the same year, in which on account of the mysterious disappearance of Camilo Cienfuegos and the arrest of Commander Hubert Matos, Fidel had the public phonetically shouting in front of the palace "Paredón" [implying "take him to the wall and shoot him"] for persons who publicly were known to be innocent. We still awaited the year 1960 with a bit of hope, which we wanted to conserve in that in time there would be a turnaround; but the first months of the year convinced us that the pact with Russia had been made and that there remained only two paths for us: to stay and await what may happen or to flee Cuba before the iron curtain fell.

The career and specialty of Rubén would make it very difficult for him to work in the underground; on the other hand, his contacts with certain sectors of Latin America could perhaps make him useful for another country, where he could speak and write without censorship. That and the moral asphyxiation which one was already experiencing in Cuba and the fear for the security of the children, made us decide to begin to get our passports and visas for the whole family in the month of April 1960.

The passports we were able to secure easily. The permits from DIER to leave the country we were also able to get, through the Fernández Insurance Agency, which also acquired the passports for us. In June, we had everything ready, but we were missing the visa from the

American Embassy. The lines waiting for visas were interminable, and they were only granting those with special motives. We requested ours, and they gave us an interview to speak with the Consulate the following 10th of January 1961. We started to pull strings to obtain an earlier interview without talking of our plans with anybody, not even with Rubén's own family, who found out our plans on the eve of the trip.

Ernesto Bascuas, who had helped us marvelously when we tried to get asylum in the Embassy for Elio Alvarez, made certain contacts which turned out ineffective. Gastón Núñez, the husband of China Benítez, got us an interview with an important official of the American Embassy, to whom we explained that because of our relationship and participation in the asylum of Elio Alvarez; my surname Riera, same as my sister, who spoke daily over shortwave radio on an "hour against the Castro government" from the United States; the connections that Rubén had with various leaders of the current Communist regime, who knew the way he thought from back in the time of the MNR of García Bárcenas; our history and active participation in the Catholic Action; the medical career of Rubén, of which the graduates were already being rumored (and in the following months actually occurred) not to be permitted to leave the country, etc. we urgently needed the visa.

We also brought out into the light my employment with Procter & Gamble, and with Esso (Exxon), Rubén's post as a reporter for the "N.C.," and 1000 more things until at last they gave us some hope and offered to call us to tell us the day and time in which we could come to the Embassy. Almost in parallel with this interview, we made another one, through Marta Alvarez, with a friend of hers, Hugo Espinosa, who for his part, was a close friend of an *attaché* of the U.S. and also offered his help. We never knew to which of these two gestures we owed the visa, or if it was the union of both gestures, but Espinosa called us one night to give us an appointment for Tuesday the 12th of July at the Embassy.

All day we spent there with five kids, but by the afternoon, we had the visa in our possession. Immediately we reserved a flight through Cubana de Aviación for Monday the 18th, although two days later, we heard that they were going to hasten up the prohibition of the doctors to leave the country, and to no longer allow taking out \$150, which was the maximum permitted to take out for each adult person; we decided to hasten our own plans and we got reservations through Jorge Diez, an employee of Pan-American, for the seven of us on Flight 422 at 6:00 p.m. on Saturday, the sixteenth of July, the day of my feast day.

Right away started the vertigo of procuring traveler's checks. You could only get them in the main office of each bank, so we went to the Trust of Aguilar and Obrapía, where we made known our kinship with Ricardo Rumbaut, Administrator of the Trust of Cienfuegos. We obtained not only the \$150 for each of us, too, but also \$150 for Rubén Gustavo, who would pass as an adult at twelve years, although he still had a few months to go. With these \$450 in total, \$50 of which we had sent to Miami with Elio Alvarez, \$100 of which had been taken to New York by Angel Powers, in his recent trip to Cuba, \$100 of which Rubén withdrew on the same day of departure, presenting his Certificate of Nationality, and \$25 of which a patient would pay Rubén in Miami, we started our adventure with the five kids.

We had left everything arranged so that Carucha and her husband, Tony, newlyweds, would move into our house at 4306 66th Street, so that they could keep our furniture and stuff, and at the same time maintain our house for our return. Only certain select people found out

about the trip. Two or three days before, Rubén's family. On the way to Rancho Boyeros, he left his brief resignation at the Hospital of Mazorra in the house of Dr. Plutzky in Fontanar. He had previously asked for a one-month vacation. To say good-bye to us at the airport, there came Bienvenido and Zoila; Carucha and Tony; Tavito and Charo; Chichí and Marita; Diego, Estelvina, and Vitalia, who found out about it at the last hour; Vicente Rumbaut, who had called us that same day and we had asked him to come by the house (when he got there later, he understood what was happening and left directly for Rancho Boyeros); Guido López and Paquita, whom Rubén told when he went by their house on the way to the airport to take a letter to Dr. Plutzky; Hector René and his sisters; our friends who had helped us, Ernesto Bascuas and Chea, Gastón Núñez and China, Alberto Gutiérrez and María (these three couples would follow us almost immediately into exile); Father Arroyo, and I think nobody else.

Before leaving we could not tell Ramón Casas and Rosita, who found out when they arrived at our house and were informed by Zoila. At the house, there also came to say good-bye to us Marta Alvarez, Zoilita Macías, and Dr. and Mrs. Gurri. Not even the neighbors suspected it, since we put the luggage in the car inside the garage; the cook was sick in her home and knew nothing; the maid, Orgelia, found out the same day. And that's counting that we had fifteen packages to prepare, that the china and the kitchen implements were boxed up, the bicycles and objects of value or interest were taken to the house of Tavito and of Cuchú; the armoires were left in order or empty, according to whether they were going to be stored or disassembled. We had lived days with a terrible agitation; buying clothes, giving away, making lists, boxing up stuff. And the boys were models of discretion, for since April in which they found out when we went to get the passports, they hadn't told anybody of our possible trip, not even their classmates, the maids, or at the house of their grandparents.

On the eve of the trip, we sold Teresita, our dear automobile, for \$1000. That helped to deal with all of the expenses of the trip, to pay for pending debts, and to leave a little extra for the move of Carucha, some monthly payments during the next few months, and a sum so they could try to send it to us by means of the Certificate of Nationality, although this last route was suspended almost immediately after our trip, and we never got to receive that sum, which we were so counting on.

At 5:00 p.m. we were at the airport, but it was almost 7:00 p.m. before we boarded the plane, and we stayed there without taking off around another half hour, due to what we didn't know. The impatience was terrible. Together with us going into exile in the same plane were Humberto Estévez and his wife, Cecilia McDonald, with his one-year-old son.

The take-off was very sad. We flew away from Cuba without knowing when we would return to her, what would happen there, if our exile would be long or short, if we would find enough to subsist in the foreign land, afraid of the thousand tasks which were surely awaiting us; asking ourselves when we would be once more with our family and our friends; and conscious of our responsibility to those five little ones who, full of cheer and ignorance, were fully living the novelty of their first airplane trip and the attraction of the unknown.

It was logical that we would break down and cry when we could no longer see Havana. How many thoughts and feelings were thrown together inside of us! Fortunately, the trip itself could not have been better, and the kids enjoyed it the whole way. Not one turbulence, no

motion sickness, not even from Mari Carmen, who had just turned five. Miryam was seven, and the boys nine, ten, and eleven.

*Miami - July 15, 1961*

It has been precisely six months since I started this scrapbook. Within a few hours, it will be our first year anniversary of exile, and time is more and more scarce for writing, and even for doing the most indispensable things. Day by day I feel more tired, more exhausted, more sad, more hopeless with respect to Cuba. These last few months, especially, have been a terrible test for the Cubans, and we've kept track of what has been happening there. It seems so remote to me, the day we reached this American land!

The trip had been pretty good, the kids enjoyed the plane a lot, but we left with a lot of delay, and later the paperwork at Immigration, the fifteen suitcases we were carrying, only my English to understand ourselves, the renting of a car so we could drive ourselves, learning the layout of the city, leaving most of our luggage at the airport so that we could all fit with a few bags in the car, took us various hours. It was past ten when we left, and in our recently-arrived confusion, we got lost and found ourselves in Hialeah, a suburb of Miami in the opposite direction of the beach, where we were headed.

It rained. The kids were hungry and tired. We couldn't find whom to ask. At last we stopped at a hospital, and a nurse gave us directions. We arrived at the Berkeley Shores Hotel on Collins Avenue in Miami Beach around midnight. A Cuban couple who lived there offered us a glass of milk for the kids, for it was too late to buy anything. We got two rooms, and even though Alberto Gutiérrez had recommended it as inexpensive, within a week we had to abandon it for another one in the same neighborhood which came out at less than half: the Dolores Apartments, which like Rubén says, was more Dolores than Apartment.

The heat, the crowding, the disorder in the small space, and too much luggage, having to throw the mattresses on the floor each night so that we doubled the beds, having to quiet the kids, who were accustomed to being loud and running around... were unforgettable days.

Immediately we got in contact with Elio Alvarez, with José Ignacio Rasco, President of the Democratic Christian Movement (DCM), with Gladys Romney, recently married in Miami to an American. Rubén enrolled in the DCM, and they put him in charge of working at the Propaganda Commission, offering him \$450, which in three months became \$350. With that we began immediately to look for a house, which was a difficult thing, having so many kids. Seven or eight blocks away was the Church and the Catholic school of St. Michael, where we enrolled the four older kids, and the house was only \$100/month furnished. It was extremely dirty, and it took a lot of work to get it into shape. It belonged to Mr. W. F. Jamison and his wife, Cecilia, who then and later were very friendly with us.

Next door lived a Cuban family, Alfonso Pérez with his wife and child and his sister-in-law, Addie, a family with whom we got along right away and turned out to be of the best help in the first times of exile. We moved on July 31 in the 1951 Henry J., which for \$80 Rubén had purchased and which even today, a year later, we miraculously maintain. That was the first thing Rubén had to learn in exile; driving a standard shift and this one was one that would stop at any



moment and you had to get under the hood to fix it. Under a tremendous deluge, we made our entry into the house.

A few days after we moved, Rubén had to go to D.C. for some psychiatric affair. I stayed alone with the kids. He took advantage and made a connection with Jaime Fonseca of the Catholic News, earning with them a few dollars more to add to our meager income. We began to eat from the cantina that was served each afternoon by Chez Mihlet. In the mornings, I would fix something light for lunch. The thirteenth of August Rubén left for Buenos Aires, in order to attend a congress of the DCM, and from there go on to Lima for a congress of journalists. He was gone about three weeks, in which I went back to being alone, but this time taking care of, besides cleaning and organizing a new house, renewing our visa at Immigration and enrolling the children after a previous visit with Mssr. McKeener, Superintendent General of the Catholic schools of Miami, who gave us a letter of recommendation for the nuns at St. Michael, since there had been some difficulty in enrolling them.

We sent for the school records from Cuba, and we enrolled the kids in the grades which corresponded to them—2nd, 6th, 7th, and 8th. Mari Carmen was not accepted, for being only five, and we had to put her in a private kindergarten of Mrs. Landry, which even though it was the cheapest we could find, cost us \$3/week from 8:30 - 11:30 a.m. For the other four, we paid \$10 at St. Michael's for 8:00 a.m. - 2:30 p.m. For thirty-five cents daily besides, they each got lunch. At first they had a very hard time with the language, especially the smaller ones, but little by little, they learned it and finished the grade with passing marks and a very good handle on the language for the older ones.

From Lima, Rubén brought for Mari Carmen a little alpaca stuffed animal, which she named Chiviricoco, and even now at one year, it's still her favorite companion day and night, for she has not slept once without it.

The house was furnished, although with old pieces of furniture. The living room ones, especially, were pretty trashed, and we were able to exchange them for two sofas which they made available to us in much better condition, and we brought them on a rented trailer, pulled by our car. On the roof of the same, we also brought a second-hand bed we bought. Also an ironing board, another cot for Luis Eduardo, whom a year later still is sleeping on it, and kitchen utensils and indispensable cleaning supplies. Gladys Romney loaned us her china and silverware she wasn't using. A fifteen dollar radio (which later had to be returned for money) completed our new installation, and we began to live this new chapter.

Recently arrived in Miami, Rubén spoke with a radio station in New York, whose programs were taped in Miami in the "hour against the Castro government," in which Pepita was a broadcaster and which at the time had a fantastic rating in Cuba. He made a calling to fight against Fidel Castro. He wrote a manifesto in the name of the DCM, which was later translated to English, directed to the Catholics, which was distributed at all the masses in Miami one Sunday<sup>2</sup>, and was read on the radio station. After coming back from South America, he also gave three talks on the radio, concerning the Congresses he had attended. And all this earned

---

<sup>2</sup> These were distributed on the windshields of cars in the parking lots of Catholic churches in Miami, not inside the churches themselves.

him an attack by the most hated commentator of Fidel, José Pardo Llada, who within a year, wound up in Mexico, asking for asylum.

Day by day more of our Cuban friends were arriving in Miami, convinced the same as us of the necessity of leaving the island. In exile the friendships got stronger and we enjoyed spending large amounts of time with them, speaking about how to resolve the Cuban situation, remembering with nostalgia the fatherland and exchanging news. Our most frequent outing became going to the airport to await family and friends. Some of them even spent the first night at our house, while they got oriented.

It wasn't until December of 1960 that the Center for Refugees, which the American government organized to receive Cubans which were by then coming in the hundreds and thousands, functioned, and then in a limited form. In Miami, we also found living there from a long time back, my ex co-worker, Lillian Whitmarsh, married to an American, and Ana Arroyo, an ex-Federada. Both tried a lot to direct us in our new life. The first exiled Cubans that we found the day following our arrival at the mass in Miami Beach were Rogelio de la Torre and others; later we found others and various patients of Rubén. Later Jorge Diez arrived and rented a house across the street from ours, where later came his sister, Nenita and René Alonso with their children.

Upon returning from his trip, he found me with a tremendous ear infection, which was not the only of the many illnesses and sufferings that we all endured in Miami. One which never really did heal was that of my hands (which either because of an allergy to the detergent or because of the humidity in my new life, in which for the first time I had so much to clean and wash) were always itching me, oozing pus, and they came to pain me a great deal. There was no money even for gloves, nor for medications, and these had to be sent from Cuba with some exile who was coming. The joints of my hands were also inflamed, perhaps from ringing out so many sheets and towels, and there were days in which I couldn't even close them, continually waking up in the night from the pain.

The mosquitoes and the heat were unendurable, as was later the cold, when winter came a little while after moving to the city, and we were hit by Hurricane Donna, which is remembered as one of the worst in the history of Miami. The uncertainty, the economic instability, the pain of Cuba, made us live continually on edge. The kids, however, were happy living these "vacations" which were indefinitely lengthening. They enjoyed much more freedom, acquired many friends, and quickly learned English. They would have fun in the yard spraying themselves with hoses or picking the most beautiful lemons from our tree, which later they would sell in the neighborhood or make lemonade. Everything was a new impression for them, and they lived on the margin of the tragedy that we ourselves lived.

The situation in Cuba worsened with tremendous speed: nationalization of all businesses, confiscation of American property; the closing of Catholic schools and later expulsion of the clergy; imprisonments, jailings, firing squads, general terror. Fidel had reunited with Nikita Khrushchev at the U.N., and Rubén published a pamphlet about the appearance of Fidel at the U.N. Other pamphlets followed, to be dispersed especially in Latin America. He had been named to the Office of Propaganda, which was in Coral Gables and published some policy papers weekly, to be distributed to thousands in South America besides some other propaganda

materials. His main collaborators there were Fermín Peinado and later Angel del Cerro, who finally became convinced that what was in Cuba was Communism.

He worked actively in the DCM, whose internal problems were affecting him a great deal and robbed him of lots of time, energy, friendships, and peace. The nervous tension was enormous. Even though all the hopes were pinned on the Camps, which were surrounded by mystery, where it was said that the American government was training Cubans for an invasion very soon.

At the beginning of November 1960, we got an unexpected call from Cuba. Carucha asked us to locate in Miami her husband's father, who had lived there for many years, divorced and remarried, so that he or one of Tony's aunts could quickly deposit money for the plane fare for her and Tony, for they had to immediately leave the country. She was already close to giving birth, and that's how they arrived and came to stay in my house until after the birth of the daughter.

Our house in Havana, with all its furniture and other objects that we had entrusted to them, were thereby lost. A family that Zoila assured us would keep them until our (at that time) probable return, would keep everything for us at the same time that they used them. In our house in Miami there arose a great haste, making room as soon as we could for Tony and Carucha in one of the three little bedrooms we had. More children had to go to sleep in the living room on canvas cots. The chores of the house and the tension grew upon me; the drop-in visits and phone calls were continuous.

Shortly before Carucha gave birth, Zoila also arrived in Miami to be able to meet her new grandchild. It was now totally impossible for her to stay in our house, so at night she went to sleep at the house of her niece, Marta Alvarez, who had also just gone into exile. And then she'd come early in the morning to pass the day in the house. Meanwhile, Tony had found some work as a typist in the offices of the DCM, and with that, was able to go live on his own after the birth by Carucha in an apartment only three blocks from the house. Estela Rosa was born at Mercy Hospital, the same day as Carucha's birthday--January 2, 1961. Rubén and I were the godparents, and we baptized her in our parish of St. Michael's. In February, Zoila returned to Cuba.

Coincidentally with Carucha's trip, there arrived in Miami my brother Tavito, with his wife and four children, the youngest one only a year old. Finally and in view of the way things were turning in Cuba, he had decided to go ahead with the exile, he who had previously so refused.

Behind he left a most gorgeous house, just built (they moved in while we were already in Miami), and his thriving Fábrica de Huatas (batting factory) to which he had dedicated long years of work and intense effort. The day after leaving Cuba, the factory was confiscated by the State, so at least he was spared seeing it in the hands of strangers.

From Cuba they'd gone to New Orleans to the home of an aunt of Charo, where they stayed a few days, but right away he wanted to leave for Miami to reunite with us. I had been unable to find them a house close to mine--as he had assigned me--so from minute one, they had to stay at our place. I asked Carucha and Tony to leave for a week and stay with his aunt until something showed up for Tavito, and so we squeezed in Lourdes, Nancy, Beatriz, Junior, Tavito,

and Charo. Those were days in which we were piled up, but Charo took on the greatest part of the work.

At last they found a house to rent and decided to stay in Miami through Christmas (the first in exile), by our side. Already Tavito had made arrangements with Mr. Lenz, his old partner in the National Batting Company, and among the various offers they made him, he accepted that of Chief of Production in a factory just installed by William T. Burnett in the little town of Statesville, N.C. At the beginning of January 1961, they all went to Panama to secure American residency, and from there to start their new home in Statesville, where they were received with open arms.

The first Christmas in exile, therefore, we passed pretty much with family: Tavito and his family, Zoila, Carucha, and Tony, and lots of friends and acquaintances. Pepita was also still in Miami. We all prayed and trusted that it would be our only Christmas out of Cuba.

Mari Carmen remained quite happy in her kindergarten, with a superb teacher, Mrs. Landry, whom she loved a lot. She went daily in the morning with the second child of the Gutiérrez-Rosell family, María Cristina, who was her inseparable friend during our stay in Miami.

We started the year with the bad luck of an accident with our "Henry J." It wasn't insured, and the other party demanded a lot of money for his car repair. At last, after much pleading and insisting and I myself going to cry to a man explaining our situation, he let it go at \$100, which for us represented an enormous fortune.

Luis Eduardo had joined the Boy Scouts of the parish, and although his troop was pretty lousy, he had a good time in the few outings they went on.

In March of 1961 a very important character made his debut in my home; a second- or third-hand washing machine, whose cost--\$57--my brother had sent me from his first savings with his job. It was marvelous for me, for my hands were worse than ever, and the trips to the laundromat (sometimes after nightfall, when all the kids were asleep) would exhaust me. There were so many children, and they got dirty playing, we always had so many guests, that the piles of dirty laundry were enormous.

Carlos Alberto was the one who kept getting worse with asthma, with which he'd suffered since he was small. The conditions of our life in Miami were not the most appropriate; besides the climate, which was a lot more humid. The dust, the crowding, the old dirty mattresses, the filthy rugs which I decided at last to get rid of even though it later cost me varnishing the floor, the few medications (which even for Rubén, it was difficult to buy without an American doctor's prescription), and the thousand stresses of exile had him in a continual attack. There were nights when it was necessary to rush him at midnight to Jackson Memorial Hospital so they could give him oxygen, for he could barely breathe.

Besides asthma, Carlos remained the Champion of the Accidents. The day I went to buy the washing machine, the kids remained at home playing. In one of their races, Carlos struck with full force the front door of the house, which was all of glass, and which one of his brothers had just slammed. He hit in particular with both forearms. The door turned to shards, and glass drove into Carlos' arms, cutting mainly the veins at the right wrist. The loss of blood was so

great that later my Cuban neighbors, the Perez family, told me they had to hose down the porch, so I would not be shocked on my return at the sight of so much blood.

When I absolutely had to go out, I would ask the neighbors to keep an eye on the kids. The moment the accident happened, an American lady who lived in the same block was passing by in her station wagon and offered to take Carlos to the hospital. In the car went her son, a schoolmate of Carlos, who seeing that the blood would not be contained, took his T-shirt off and wrapped it around Carlos' wrist. As a result, the wounds got infected. Carlos was pretty bad off. He had lost much blood, they had to give him a bunch of stitches, and although he was quite allergic to the toxoid, there was no choice but to inject him to prevent tetanus. The asthmatic reaction which he had a few days hence was the worst we could remember, and for weeks he was in a very delicate state.

Nonetheless, he finished his grade satisfactorily, the same as his brothers. They had all enrolled in the next grade that corresponded to them, just as if they had continued in Cuba, so it turned out that all three boys were one year ahead of the average American child. Rubén G. graduated from 8th grade before turning thirteen; Luis E. finished 7th before turning twelve, and Carlos A. the 6th sixth grade before turning eleven.

Rubén Gustavo went and joined the baseball team of St. Michael's School. At the end of the school year, they celebrated with a meal and gave him the "Most Valuable Player" trophy for baseball. In this picture, he's with the coach, the parish priest, and two other boys who got trophies for other sports.

Among the many activities which in the meantime Rubén had were those of the Medical Association in Exile, which together with Enrique Huertas, he helped found and organize towards the end of 1960. Huertas was the first president (and was for many years after) and Rubén the first vice-president.

We happened to be close in the first months of 1961 to what became known as the Generational Crisis, which undermined the unity of the exiles so far achieved in the Revolutionary Front. The Front had formed months before out of (1) the Authentics headed by Tony Varona, (2) the sympathizers of the Popular Party directed by Aureliano Sánchez Arango, (3) the "Montecristi" Group of Justo Carrillo which pulled together a small group of military men, diplomats, etc., (4) the MRR with Manuel Artime as President, which integrated elements for the most part Catholic, many of which came from the Rebel Army, and (5) the DCM with José I. Rasco as President.

Aureliano had been the first to get disgusted with the attitude of the Americans and had left the Front, combining new sectors, one of Authentic youth elements headed by Cobo, and another mainly of colonos with Ricardo Rafael Sardiñas. The four youngest ones of the Front came up with a manifesto of the *Generational Thesis*, which was published on January 28th. The disgust with the other two provoked a total crisis. The Americans then decided to ignore all of them and form a new organ called the Revolutionary Council, which was joined by the party of Manolo Ray, Tony Varona and Justo Carrillo, Artime (who vetoed the vice-president of the MRR who had been acting while Artime spent time in the military training camps), and some individual personalities. Later the DCM also came on line. Council President was named Dr. José A. Miró, first Premier of the Revolution after the fall of Batista. We were not aware of how close the invasion was already; it was surprising how one could see things accelerate.

In Miami in the meantime there spread a fever to enlist in the campamentos. Cubans came from everywhere to conscript. Already since February Rubén had enlisted in the Army, but thanks to the insistence of mainly Dr. Gurri, they decided to transfer him to the Medical Corps of the invasion. He was the only psychiatrist of some forty doctors enlisted. It was decided that they not go to the training camps, but that they train in Miami proper on Medicine of War. They were outfitted head to toe (including two pairs of combat boots which they were asked to start wearing in order to break them in), they were vaccinated, they were relieved from being on guard at the hospitals so they could leave at a moment's notice, etc. Rubén had resigned from the Office of Propaganda and started pulling in \$400/month as a doctor's salary, which I was to cash while he was in combat. Even though the hopes for victory were enormous, as we knew we had the U.S. behind us, it was a tremendous decision for us to have to separate, me staying in Miami with the children until we could return to reunite in Cuba, by then free of Communism.

Quite a bit later than Rubén and after much indecision, Tony had also conscripted in the Army. On April 7, out of the blue, they notified him at home that there was an open seat in the next plane leaving that afternoon in the group--as we later learned--which would next take off for the training camps, and that same afternoon, he departed. Our surprise to learn that ten days later, the Invasion of Playa Girón was carried out was enormous. Right away, Rubén got his troop assignment and more than once, we said good-bye, thinking that the Medical Corps would then be sent.

The news, however, began to reach us; at first contradictory and later frankly pessimistic. The hours and days of anguish and expectation that began to be suffered would later extend indefinitely. All Miami was waiting on word from Girón, and at last there came the confirmation of the complete disaster, of the lack of American cooperation, of the deaths and imprisonment of the invaders, their appearance on Cuban TV (a program we had heard on radio in Miami, hearing directly from his own lips Tony's name), the closing of the recruitment offices, etc., etc.

Those were unforgettable days of suffering. First and foremost was the defeat in Cuba, whose full import we immediately understood. It was not a battle lost, but the prestige and confidence in the Americans, the collapse of all hopes of freeing ourselves from Communism, and a transcendental event which would keep reverberating for long years in the history of Cuba and the U.S., as in effect happened.

The search to try to locate Tony, the phone calls to and from Cuba to find out about Tony and if Rubén had gone to Cuba, the deaths and wounds of so many of our friends, the persecution unleashed in Cuba arresting thousands of our people, the scenes and stories of terror which kept arriving. For days, we lived stupefied, unable to but cry at all hours. And yet, blessing God that Rubén had not had to go.

In our personal realm, we were also very affected economically. Rubén received one more check and then became totally without income, for no way was he going to accept the salary they offered since he was not to provide any labor. Carucha came to live with us--she and the child--for a few months when Tony entered prison. Finally we decided to turn to the Refugee Center and began to receive \$100/month which the American government issued to each family and which went entirely to rent. Fortunately they gave us a portion of food (powdered milk, flour, rice, beans, sugar, powdered eggs, lard...) with which we tried to solve the problem of getting fed.

Since January, Rubén had started to write gratis a series of “Cartas al Comandante” for the *Diario Las Américas*. Now he started to write for money for the N.C. and for the U.S. Information Service (USIS), but this did not go far; it was little and sporadic. There came to be not one cent in the house even to replace the boys' worn-out shoes. It's not surprising, for example, that one night we went like indigents to the river shore to look through a shipment of bananas which had gone overripe to see if we could find some that we could eat.

In May, Rubén made a decision. Playa Girón having failed, we had to face up to the reality that we would have many years of exile before us. There were five children to maintain, and he had a career that he could practice in the future in the U.S. But his command of English was too poor to be able to take the Foreign Medical Exam, so he decided to first enroll in an Intensive English course at the University of Miami. He would go to class in the morning and study in the afternoon.

In June, he started taking a course in Medicine offered at Jackson Memorial Hospital for Cuban doctors wanting to prepare for the Foreign Medical Exam. He spent all summer this way, studying intensely, mainly at night when he had no classes to attend and there would settle some semblance of tranquility in that house which was so small, so uncomfortable, inhabited by so many people. Often daybreak found him studying; needless to say that all the nerves in the house were frayed, and how much one had to put up with and bear in that new stage of preparation and sacrifice of all kinds.

Fun outings had to be very few. There was neither the time nor money for that. The kids had fun their own way in the yard and the neighborhood. They would go alone to the library, run errands for me, take care of Estela Rosa, and their main attraction was going to Miami Beach to swim, but sometimes we didn't even have enough for gas. And Rubén needed the "junker" at all hours for his classes in the University and the Hospital, for his trips to the library, and for the thousand meetings and complications at the DCM.

Another place of interest in that house was the "attic" where, by necessity, we had to keep not only luggage and stuff not needed at the moment, but also things we'd need every so often but could find no nook nor cranny in which to put them. Because of that, we would not go two or three days without Luis, the most agile (there were no stairs to the attic) and the only one who could fit through the tiny opening in the ceiling that went to the attic, having to climb up to get something.

In June, one more heartache was added to what we already endured: the illness and unexpected operation followed by the sudden death of Chichí, Rubén's godmother, who had so loved Rubén and my children. They all loved her a lot and remembered her constantly. How she herself had suffered with that separation! She died on the 19th in a clinic in Havana.

Taking advantage of the long 4th of July weekend, Tavito and Charo went to see us in Miami. They were happy in Statesville but far away from everything. Miami kept being a boiling pot after the failure at Playa Girón (Bay of Pigs). The subject of the prisoners and of their possible ransom for tractors was always everywhere. We were able to make few outings because "Henry J." every day was more banged up, and it had to last us until the Foreign, which would be in October. It would get stranded continually; it would rain inside same as outside, and in Miami it rains cats and dogs almost daily, we didn't all fit in it, it was all worn out on the inside, although even so, it still provided us with service.

A mysterious and even miraculous thing happened to us these days. A gentleman from Minnesota, who was writing his thesis on Cuba for his study of Latin America, needed to make a survey among Cubans and he wrote to the Cuban Medical Association to see if someone could help him. Rubén found his letter, we got in contact with him, and thanks to the surveys which we did for him, \$250 came to us unexpectedly.

Another day when we didn't have the least hope of getting money which we urgently needed, we got in the mail \$50, which we had put in as a deposit when we got here for the telephone company, which was automatically reimbursed after one year. And so with the help of God, and of many friends who went out of their way to loan us money, we kept enduring the necessary months in order to build ourselves a future.

*Albuquerque - January 1962*

During the months that we'd spent in exile, we had sadly noticed how ill-informed were the Catholics and the Catholic groups of America, concerning the Cuban situation. Now that the religious persecution turned up on the island, that they confiscated the properties of the church, took over the Catholic schools, that they threw out their religious Orders en masse; even on one day, more than 100 priests and one bishop, they profaned the churches and openly taught Communism and atheism, it became urgent to make known the situation to the hierarchy and Catholic institutions of the continent. What Rubén and I had so desired to do occurred simultaneously to Miguel Suárez, an old Cuban Catholic leader, and with his cooperation, we were able to begin publishing in June of 1961 a bulletin with Catholic news, which we titled "Información Católica Cubana." We wrote it in Spanish for Latin America and later we translated it to English for the U.S. It had much success, and the printing had to be increased month after month. It took time and effort, but it was truly worth it.

In September we had to think again about school for the kids. Mari Carmen was already six years old, and could be admitted to the first grade at St. Michael's after two and a half years in kindergarten and pre-K, and another in Miami. Above in the school photos are shown Luis and Carlos with the horrible haircuts that they would get at the barber academy for only fifty cents. The only ones we could afford, and even that was sacrifice.

By then the Colegio de Belén de Cuba had already been taken over by the Communists; the Jesuit priests had arrived in Miami, and they began a high school in the church of Gesu downtown. Many classmates of Rubén D. began to send children, and of course, we also enrolled Rubén G., who daily had to take the bus to the school.

At last came October, so desired and so dreaded! On the 17th would be the Foreign Medical Exam, which would decide our next destiny. At home sometimes the doctors Casuso and Plutzky came to study, both of whom had a perfect command of English. Rubén felt very insecure, in spite of all that he had studied. It was his whole career, which for many years he had dedicated to psychiatry, and he was not very familiarized in English. The exam was to last all day, 360 questions in the form of multiple choice, and a clinical history to determine diagnosis, prescribe, and prognosticate. They were sealed exams, which on the same day and time would be opened simultaneously around the world.

On the average, one third of those who took it would completely pass; one third would get a good grade but less than 75%, and so were only allowed to practice for two years before



which date, they needed to retake the exam. The remaining third would always flunk. The exams were all graded together by IBM in Evanston, Illinois and it would take six weeks to be informed. Those were weeks of uncertainty, anguish, daily wait for the mailman, until finally in the last week of November, we received the letter with the marvelous news that Rubén had passed the exam completely.

During all of these months and especially after the Bay of Pigs, the avalanche of Cuban exiles was tremendous. The news that would reach us from Cuba each time was more painful. Zoila would write us openly about everything, sending the correspondence to the name which we had picked even before we left—Conchita Vidal and later also Manolo Vidal. On the 15th of October in a big sweep that they made in Cuba of the MRP where they imprisoned its leader, Reynaldo Gonzales, they also arrested Héctor René López, cousin of Rubén, and godfather of Carlos Alberto. Everyday the list of our friends who were jailed or shot would grow.

At the beginning of November, Rubén was invited on an all-expense paid trip to Puerto Rico to serve as reporter for a religious event to be celebrated there. He also wrote some reports for the N.C. It was only for a few days, but he much appreciated getting to know Puerto Rico, so similar to Cuba, and it also served him to while away the wait for his grade on the Foreign. As soon as this arrived, he went directly to the V.A. Hospital in Coral Gables to ask for a post in psychiatry. The red tape started, and he sent his resume out.

Doctors Gurri and Casuso gave him some magnificent letters of recommendation. The state hospital in Georgia insisted that he go there. A hospital close to Lexington, KY wrote him several letters inviting him to come. A representative from the University of Morgantown, West Virginia on a trip to Miami, kept pressuring him (until the moment that he had to take his plane back) to become Assistant Professor of Psychiatry with a magnificent salary and even better opportunities in the future. We had bought a big map of the United States, and each night we'd spread it out over the dining room table without deciding where we would go.

There were many things to consider: the health of Carlos; the cold and humid climate of West Virginia; the states that had a lot of obstacles to foreign doctors to later get licensed by the Board; the facilities for college for the boys; Rubén's English, which even though it improved a lot during the course, was still very uncertain and not fluent. We would go to the public libraries to find information regarding the various places where there were vacancies. The V.A. alone offered him fifteen positions.

At the end, after thinking it over a lot, we made the application to the V.A. in Albuquerque, New Mexico. It had been recommended as the ideal climate for asthmatics, a desert climate, high and dry. There was a large Spanish-speaking population, good schools, and a growing city. The position they offered was that of Chief of the Mental Hygiene Clinic Outpatient Service. They offered him a salary of \_\_\_\_ [sic], and he could start January 1, 1962. They'd pay the trip for the whole family as well as the move.

Immediately the fever of preparations started. The Refugee Center gave us each a jacket. We'd get to Albuquerque on the moment of the most intense cold. We decided to spend Christmas in Miami and start the trip on the 29th at 8 a.m.

Carucha organized an early birthday party for Estela Rosa, who would be one on January 2nd, and those are the photos to the left. Also shown in them is Carmencita Lombardero, distant

relative of Rubén, whose parents had sent her in the plan of the American government to quickly take out the children under eighteen years old. She stayed at the Kendall Camp close to Miami, and a few weekends we'd go and get her so she could spend time with us. In one of the trips when we were returning to drop her off at camp, our dear car "Henry" stopped working for good.

We said good-bye to our many friends in Miami, and with a debt of over \$1000, without furniture or appliances for the home, with only \$50 in our pocket, and without knowing what this new stage of exile had in store for us, we boarded the plane with our five children and started our new life of work in this great American nation.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Postscript

We lost Granmami to cancer on January 14, 1997. She died at home in Sugar Land, Texas, in her own words, "at peace with myself, at peace with the family, at peace with the world, and at peace with God." She faced death with dignity and strength. My own memories of her never include her alone; she was always amid the hustle and bustle of the kitchen, organizing and expediting, making sure plates matched bowls, everyone had napkins, all the water glasses were filled. She was ever in motion, always talking a mile a minute, always impeccably dressed and radiant, and she always made me feel as if I were the reason for her beautiful smile.

How many times did I walk down what seemed to a child an endless hallway past several rooms until we reached the end--a linen closet, where she always picked out sheets and blankets for me to sleep on. No matter how many people spent the holidays at her house, everyone was made comfortable. Everyone was fed. And she never went to sleep until she saw that everyone was taken care of.

I was born twelve years after the family was exiled. I knew I was Cuban as a little girl, although I wasn't sure exactly what that entailed. I knew my Granpapi was an important man, and I knew I was special because I was a part of this family. I have never been to Cuba, but I have spent countless holidays listening to the music of the island, trying to follow the rhythmic sounds of the Spanish language, consuming plantain chips, mangoes, and guava, and guzzling malta after malta. So perhaps I have internalized some Cuban traditions. Perhaps I am part of the legacy of the Banana Boat Story.

Looking back at this story of exile and reacculturation, at this "Banana Boat Story," we must ask ourselves what it means to be Cuban. Carlos sums it up succinctly: To be Cuban you have to think of yourself as a Cuban, and other Cubans have to think of you as Cuban. Miryam believes it includes the ability to "talk" with your hands. Michelle's husband, Dugan, believes the litmus test is "*if you eat black beans and rice for the first time and like them, you are an honorary Cuban.*" He goes on to include fried plantains and flan in this test. Rubén G., of course, breaks his answer down into statistical information, but also proclaims baseball ability

and passion as Cuban traits. Beatriz says it is “*an idea put in your head and perpetuated by your parents.*” In this manner, Granmami and Granpapi instilled the idea of Cuban pride in their children.

The degrees of feeling “different” from North Americans vary, but Beatriz explains, “*You knew being Cuban meant being superior to the Americans... because everything in Cuba was better than in America.*” In The Cuban American Family Album (CAFA), Luis Botifoll echoes her sentiments: “Immigrants want to assimilate because, by and large, they have brought with them unhappy memories of their native countries. But we don't have bad memories of Cuba. Before 1959, we did not think the U.S. was better. We thought Cuba was better. And most of us still do” (80). This explanation goes a long way toward making sense of the Cuban pride that exists in exiles, many of whom left almost forty years ago.

Both Granmami and Granpapi had a sense that they would return to Cuba someday, that the move was provisional, that Castro would inevitably be ousted. In that mind-frame, they were not eager to become Americanized, for they were not denouncing their Cuban past. Rubén G. refers to a “Next Year Jerusalem” attitude as a “mantra-like hope, if not rock-solid conviction.” Home was always Cuba.

Perhaps one testimony to this hope is the painting of the *Salto de La Hanabanilla* that has hung over the couch in Granmami and Granpapi's living room ever since I can remember. “Hanabanilla” is the Indian name for a waterfall north of Cienfuegos, the native town of Granpapi. The painting, which he saw in a gallery in 1973, reminded him of his high school excursion to those very cold waters. He bought it for \$300, and it has hung there for almost as long as I have drawn breath.

In CAFA, Gustavo Pérez Firmat speaks of his exiled Cuban parents, now in their seventies. “No matter how many years they have resided away from the island—and if they live long enough soon there will come a time when they will have lived longer in Miami than they did in Havana—they are as Cuban today as they were when they got off the ferry in October of 1960 (92).” I think we could argue that this applies also to Granmami and Granpapi, who never lost their accents, their ability to speak a mile a minute and with their hands, or their love and fondness for their homeland.

So at what point is this Cuban identity lost? Obviously, with two Cuban parents, it is more easily instilled than with only one. Will my children feel Cuban? Should they? It is as Gustavo Pérez Firmat says in Life on the Hyphen, that Cuba is “an endearing fiction, as ethereal as the smoke of their grandfather's cigars (which are not even Cuban but Dominican).” For myself, that Cuba is as make-believe as Never-Never-Land. The Cuba that was is not, and the Cuba that is does not hold any mystique for me. I have no desire to visit the island as long as Castro is in power. It can never be the place I have heard about.

\*\*\*\*\*

**The Rumbaut-Riera Family: An Illustrated History and Genealogy, online at:**

<http://rumbautfamilytree.com/family.htm>

<http://rumbautfamilytree.com/toc.html>